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*Theological Conflict over  
the Ecumenical Vision in the 1970s:  
José Míguez Bonino and John Meyendorff  
on Christian Unity*

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“The attempt to achieve unity without radically changing its forms of representation, financing, deliberation and operation becomes a clear option for the continuation of the colonial past and has to be resisted and rejected by those churches and groups which are trying to overcome this past. (...) As in other times in history, the quest for the true unity is at the same time the struggle for the true division. (...) At the present point it is enough to realize that the historical ecumenical movement...becomes largely irrelevant for our own problem.” (J. Míguez Bonino, “A Latin American Attempt to Locate the Question of Unity”, in *What Kind of Unity?* Geneva, WCC, 1973, p. 59, 57, 55)

**Introduction:**  
**When the search for true unity  
is understood as the struggle for true division...**

The purpose of this essay is to review a paradigmatic debate that took place in the early 1970s in the Commission on Faith and Order, one of the most important think-tanks of the World Council of Churches. Since its inception as a worldwide movement in 1910, Faith and Order has been a forum for the discussion of questions of church doctrine and organisation that for centuries have kept apart the Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed and other churches. It was hoped that, as a result of those discussions, the divided Christian

churches worldwide would move from separation to what was called the goal of “visible unity”.

Like the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the modern ecumenical movement, understood as the problem of church division and its solution, turns in last instance around the role of the Christian church in God’s saving design for humanity and the whole world. The understanding of the role of the Church in God’s salvation, in other words the way the notions God-church-world or God-world-church are articulated, traditionally influences the understanding of what visible Christian unity should be like and therefore how it should be pursued in the ecumenical movement.

During the 1960s, new emerging theological perspectives on God’s saving work in the world and the mission of the church began to call into question the prevailing understanding of the goal of unity of the ecumenical movement and the way to achieve it expressed in the sequence God-church-world. However, the complexities related to pursuing a goal that sought to subsume conflicting confessional descriptions of it were aggravated and reconfigured by a set of new problems about unity which were manifestly transversal to those conflicting confessional views, and which gave prominence to the alternative sequence God-world-church.

This is what I intend to clarify by reviewing the participation of the Argentinean Methodist theologian José Míguez Bonino in two major conferences that Faith and Order dedicated to the goal of visible unity. The first was held in Louvain, Belgium, in 1971 and the second in Salamanca, Spain, in 1973. Another way of formulating the topic of this article is to raise the question about what makes it possible for a worldwide recognised theologian and ecumenist like Míguez Bonino to contend, as one can read in the epigraph of this essay, that the quest for the true unity is at the same time the struggle for the true division.

To clarify the state of the question God-church-world and its relation to the search for Christian unity in the

ecumenical movement in the late 1960s, I will refer to the ecumenical theology of the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, W.A. Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985). His thinking on God-church-world and the goal of unity largely contributed to the shaping of the vision of the modern ecumenical movement.

In sections two and three I will then show how José Míguez Bonino put central aspects of this prevailing vision under critical scrutiny during the two Faith and Order conferences to which I have just made reference. Let me note as a teaser that for Míguez Bonino, our thinking about God's saving design for the world, the role of the churches and their unity in it may depart from its biblical roots if it is not fully aware of its radical historicity and the politics intrinsic to that historicity.

In other words, Míguez contends that the vision of the ecumenical movement in general, and the theological programme of Faith and Order in particular, focus primarily on a set of theological issues such as the nature and mission of the church which in reality are organically connected with a systemic set of "non-theological factors" which are equally, if not more, dividing. By ignoring this unintentionally or intentionally, an ecumenical idealism, or an ecumenical innocence, may well issue in a kind of ecumenical "violence". Let us take a detour by Visser 't Hooft to come back to Míguez's criticism of John Meyendorff and, with him, of Faith and Order.

## I. Visser 't Hooft: from the Unity of the Church to the Unity of Humanity

### I.1. Christian unity beyond the social gospel and dialectical theology in the late 1920s

The roots of W. A. Visser 't Hooft's ecumenical theology lie ultimately in his youth days' attempt to transcend what the young international YMCA leader then experienced, in his own work and in the emerging ecumenical movement, as a living polarisation between Church and

world or, more precisely, between the horizontalist, optimistic, world-bound activism of the North American Social Gospel, and the verticalist, pessimistic indifference towards human achievement exhibited by the German speaking dialectical theology<sup>1</sup>. The flown of the Social Gospel, he notes in his 1928 doctoral thesis *The Background of the Social Gospel in America*<sup>2</sup>, is to be found in its doctrine of God. The social gospel replaces the reign of the biblical wholly Other, who judges and forgives, by the reign of “ethical principles”.

In his future ecumenical thinking and practice, the independent Barthian sought to hold together Christocentrism and the concern for the renewal and unity of the Church, on the one hand, and mission and witness to and within all spheres of public life and international relations on the other hand<sup>3</sup>. The churches which are no longer completely isolated from each other while not yet truly united will grow into full visible unity as they respond together as World Council of Churches to *The Pressure of their Common Calling*<sup>4</sup> in *marturia*, *diakonia* and *koinonia*.

Forty years after his 1928 doctoral thesis, Visser 't Hooft had not departed from his early theological and ecumenical insights. Hendrikus Berkhof once remarked that Visser 't Hooft's address to the 1968 WCC Uppsala Assembly showed clearly that the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches remained attached to his vertically, eschatologically oriented way of articulating God's Kingdom-Church-World<sup>5</sup>. A Christianity that has lost its vertical dimension, Visser 't Hooft said, “has lost

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<sup>1</sup>W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *Memoirs*, Geneva, WCC, 1973, 26-27; Cf. also H. Berkhof, “Visser 't Hooft as Ecumenical Theologian”, *The Ecumenical Review*, 38(2), April 1986, 203-208.

<sup>2</sup> W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Background of the Social Gospel in America*, Haarlem, H.D. Tjeenk Willink, 1928; cf. also: Saint Louis (USA), Bethany Press, 1962.

<sup>3</sup>W.A. Visser 't Hooft and J.H. Oldham, *The Church and its Function in Society*, London, G. Allen & Unwin, 1937.

<sup>4</sup> W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Pressure of Our Common Calling*, London, SCM Press, 1959.

<sup>5</sup> H. Berkhof, “Visser 't Hooft as Ecumenical Theologian”, *The Ecumenical Review*, 38(2), April 1986, 203-208.

its salt” and become “useless for the world”<sup>6</sup>. A Christianity which uses the vertical preoccupation to escape its responsibility for the common life of humanity “is a denial of the incarnation, of God’s love for the world manifested in Christ”<sup>7</sup>. Humanity is one because of its “common calling”. Thus, it is one not in itself, but “as the object of God’s love”<sup>8</sup>. The vertical dimension of its unity “determines the horizontal dimension”<sup>9</sup>.

## I.2. A new way of articulating God-church-world and the search for Christian unity

But this reference to Visser ’t Hooft’s address to the 1968 WCC Uppsala Assembly intends to be more than just the late reaffirmation of his way of articulating God’s saving work for the world, the church and the search for Christian visible unity. As a matter of fact, what made Visser ’t Hooft insist on this core element of his ecumenical vision was his perception that once again in the history of the modern ecumenical movement there seemed to be, as in the 1920s, a growing polarisation in the understanding of the relation between the Church and the world. From the late 1930s ecumenical watchword “let the Church be the Church”<sup>10</sup> for the salvation of the world, the ecumenical movement seemed to be moving, in his view, to “let the world be the world” for the sake of its – and the churches’ - salvation. We seem to find here a new configuration of the ever-conflicting problem of the more active or more passive mediating role of the Church in God’s salvation and the implications of this understanding for a theology of Christian unity.

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<sup>6</sup> W.A. Visser ’t Hooft, “The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement”, in M. Kinnamon and B.E. Cope (eds), *The Ecumenical Movement – An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, Geneva, WCC, 1997, 39.

<sup>7</sup> W.A. Visser ’t Hooft, “The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement”, *op. cit.*, 39.

<sup>8</sup> W.A. Visser ’t Hooft, “The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement”, *op. cit.*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> W.A. Visser ’t Hooft, “The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement”, *op. cit.*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> “The first duty of the church, and its greatest service to the world, is that it be in very deed the church...”, cf. J. H. Oldham (ed.), *The Oxford Conference (Official Report)*, Chicago, Willet, Clark, 1937, 45.

The first sign of what Visser 't Hooft called “a new orientation” in the way of articulating Church and world could already be discerned, he wrote a few years later in his autobiography, in a 1960 World Student Christian Federation teaching conference on the life and mission of the Church held in Strasbourg, France. The addresses given by K. Barth, D. T. Niles, Leslie Newbigin and Visser 't Hooft himself “did not seem to give the students what they wanted”. They did not seem to be as concerned with the life of the Church as they were with “action in the world”<sup>11</sup>. The impact of that experience on his understanding of the ecumenical movement should not be underestimated. Years later, 1960 will mark for him the beginning a new period, more precisely the fourth period, in the history of the modern efforts to make Christian unity visible.

Visser 't Hooft's early 1960s suspicion was significantly reinforced by the Geneva 1966 WCC world conference on “Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of our Time”<sup>12</sup>. In that celebrated conference, the middle axiom “responsible society”, formulated by J. Oldham soon before the 1937 Conference on Life and Work<sup>13</sup> and for many years one of the pillars of ecumenical social thought, was rejected by critical theological voices from the “third world”, such as the American Presbyterian theologian and missionary Richard Shaull<sup>14</sup>, on the grounds that in the new historical reality of economic, political and cultural emancipation, the notion of “responsible society” which in Shaull's view emphasised solidarity, transcendent values and human rights, failed to grasp “the character of revolutionary social change” and consequently tended, in the words of the American

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<sup>11</sup> W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *Memoirs*, Geneva, WCC, 1973, 366.

<sup>12</sup> *Christians in the Technical and Social revolutions of our Time: World Conference on Church and Society – Geneva, July 12-26, 1966*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1967.

<sup>13</sup> J.H. Oldham & W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Church and its Function in Society*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1937, 209.

<sup>14</sup> R. Shaull, “The Revolutionary Challenge to Church and Theology”, in M. Kinnamon and B.E. Cope (eds), *The Ecumenical Movement – An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, Geneva, WCC, 1997, 302; cf. L. S. Mudge, “Ecumenical social Thought”, in J. Briggs et alii (eds), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement Volume 3 1968-2000*, Geneva, WCC, 281; K. Raiser, “Holding Different Perspectives Together – Forty Years of Engagement for Social and Economic Justice”, *The Ecumenical Review*, 59(1), January 2007, 7.

ecumenist and social ethicist Lewis S. Mudge, “to support the status quo”<sup>15</sup>.

The spectrum of the “new orientation” - of a Christian anti-institutional “horizontalism” that translated emancipation as salvation - will haunt some of Visser ’t Hooft’s later writings on the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches. It explains, as I have just remarked, the rhetoric of his 1968 address to the WCC Uppsala Assembly on *The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement*, built around the vision of the whole Gospel for the whole world, the centrality of the Church in the Gospel proclamation and practice, and the need for its visible unity required by its nature and calling. It explains also the nostalgic warning launched at the final pages of his *Memoirs*: “... I welcome the new orientation in principle, but that does not mean that I am happy about all that is being said or done in the name of the new orientation”<sup>16</sup>. He would strike the same note in a series of lectures given in the Netherlands in May 1972, later published under a symptomatic, if not premonitory title: “Has the Ecumenical Movement a Future?”<sup>17</sup> While arguing that the 1960s’ “new orientation” emphasised the ecumenical “movements” over against the (institutional) churches, inter-religious dialogue over against Christian mission, and the humanisation of the world over against the Christianisation of societies, he responded to those three polarisations by emphasising church renewal, Christocentric inter-religious dialogue, and the churches “prophetic witness” in the world.

As late as 1983, Visser ’t Hooft took the opportunity of a lecture to the students of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute to raise some “Questions about the future of the World Council of Churches”<sup>18</sup>. The World Council, he contended in an implicit reference to the Council’s theological basis, relies on three fundamental convictions:

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<sup>15</sup> L. S. Mudge, “Ecumenical social Thought”, in J. Briggs et alii (eds), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement Volume 3 1968-2000*, Geneva, WCC, 281.

<sup>16</sup> W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, *Memoirs*, op. cit., 367-368.

<sup>17</sup> W.A. Visser ’t Hooft, *Has the Ecumenical Movement a Future?* Belfast, Christian Journals, 1974.

<sup>18</sup> W.A. Visser ’t Hooft, “Questions about the Future of the World Council of Churches”, *The Ecumenical Review*, 38(2), April 1986.

Christocentrism, the authority of the Bible, and the need for the coming together of the churches. Christocentrism – and consequently *No Other Name*<sup>19</sup> than Christ - is being challenged by the notion of a wider ecumenism with inter-religious approach; the authority of Scriptures is being challenged by the problem of *The Fatherhood of God in an Age of Emancipation*<sup>20</sup>, and the coming together of the churches, which requires organised forms of common life, is being challenged by a contemporary revolt against the Church as institution and against church institutions such as the World Council of Churches.

Visser 't Hooft had built his ecumenical theology, and helped to shaped the self-understanding and action of the WCC, on a specific understanding of the role of the Church in God's salvation of the world. New understandings of that key theological and ecumenical issue emerged as the WCC turned increasingly global not only confessionally but also geographically and culturally in the post-war years marked by anti-colonial struggles in the “third world”. This would challenge the understanding of the goal of the ecumenical movement and the way of pursuing it.

## II. Louvain 1971: Míguez Bonino on Meyendorff's “idealism”

### II.1. Uppsala 1968: the unity of the Church and the unity of humanity

In August 1971 the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order held its first full commission meeting after the 1968 assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Uppsala, Sweden. In hindsight, that Assembly is often seen as a moment in which the “new orientation” that Visser 't Hooft saw emerge among Christian students in the 1960 (“God-world-church”), and which had gained momentum after

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<sup>19</sup> W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *No Other Name: the Choice between Syncretism and Christian Universalism*, London, SCM Press, 1963.

<sup>20</sup> W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Fatherhood of God in an Age of Emancipation*, Geneva, WCC, 1982.



the WCC 1966 Conference on church and society, seemed to extend its influence on different areas of the Council's life and programmatic work.

The theme of the Assembly's Section I Report was "The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church"<sup>21</sup>. The starting point of the Report was the admission that "it seems to many, inside and outside the Church, that the struggle for Christian unity in its present form is irrelevant to the immediate crisis of our times"<sup>22</sup>. The report attempted to overcome the growing polarisation around the search for Christian unity by proposing what Bishop Karekim Sarkissian, the future Catholicos of all Armenians and Vice-Chairperson of Section I, called in his presentation of the text a "forward looking perspective" that makes us "look ahead for a genuine understanding of catholicity"<sup>23</sup>.

According to the report, engagement in the "agonising arena of contemporary history", seen as the place "where God is already at work to make all things new", enabled the churches to see new implications of the oneness, holiness, apostolicity, and particularly the catholicity of the Church. God makes catholicity available to men and women in the world. Christ's purpose is to bring "people of all times, of all races, of all places, of all conditions" into an "organic and living unity"<sup>24</sup>. Catholicity is the inner dimension of this unity. It is a relational, dynamic dimension of the Church. It is both gift and task. It reaches its completion "when what God has already begun in history is finally disclosed and fulfilled". Catholicity "is the opposite to all kinds of egoism and particularism".<sup>25</sup>

The text goes on to show the denials of catholicity. It then applies its renewed notion of catholicity to the fellowship of the WCC by relating it successively to the quest for

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<sup>21</sup> "The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church", in N. Goodall (Ed.), *The Uppsala Report 1968*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968, 11-19.

<sup>22</sup> "The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church", paragraph 3.

<sup>23</sup> K. Sarkissian, "Introduction to the Theme", in N. Goodall (Ed.), *The Uppsala Report 1968*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968, 7-8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 7.

diversity, the quest for continuity, the quest for unity, and the quest for the unity of humanity.

The world is pointing to “secular catholicities of its own”<sup>26</sup>. Christians deny catholicity when they confuse it “with other solidarities and communities”<sup>27</sup> by allowing prejudices to prevent the search for unity, determining church membership by “discrimination based on race, wealth, social class or education”, refusing to exhibit in their common life “the essential oneness in Christ of men and women”, allowing other allegiances to prevent “the organic union of the churches”, and prescribing on other Christians “their customary practices” as the “condition for cooperation and unity”<sup>28</sup>.

In other words, Christians deny catholicity when they fail to distinguish the world’s oikoumene from the oikoumene of God’s reign; when they fail to hold critically together the search for the visible unity of the Church and “the essential truth of human nature as of one blood, in equal right and dignity through every diversity of race and kind”.

The challenge of holding critically together the search for the manifestation of the One Church and the manifestation of the one humanity is the conflicting issue that, not only at Uppsala, but also in the following years, will challenge the ecumenical vision described at the WCC Assembly in New Delhi 1961, which was formulated in terms of a visible unity of all Christians “in each place” entered by a common understanding of the apostolic faith, sacramental life, ministry, as well as common mission and witness.

As one of the theological divisions of the World Council of Churches, Faith and Order had to address this issue. Thus the main theme of its Louvain 1971 full commission meeting was “The Unity of the Church and the Unity of Mankind”<sup>29</sup>. The Commission had already engaged in

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Faith and Order Louvain 1971 – Study Reports and Documents*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1971, 7-31.

studies on similar themes during the 1960s, such as “The Finality of Jesus Christ in the Age of Universal History” (1962)<sup>30</sup>, “Creation, New Creation and the Unity of the Church” (1964-1967)<sup>31</sup> “God in Nature and History” (1965-1967)<sup>32</sup>, and “Man in Nature and History” (1968)<sup>33</sup>. Since Uppsala, the Faith and Order study process on “Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind” had given rise to widespread discussion involving a considerable number of regional groups around the world<sup>34</sup>.

One of the main tasks of the Louvain 1971 meeting was to review the whole of the ongoing Faith and Order work considering the post-Uppsala’s challenge to the understanding of unity. The remarkable Ernst Lange, whose *Die ökumenische Utopie* was largely inspired by the Louvain 1971 meeting, wrote about it that most of the participants realised that the problem of church unity was being set in an “unfamiliar light”: unity now meant “something materially different from what it had meant before”, and this could represent “a break with the traditional understanding and the traditional mandate of Faith and Order”<sup>35</sup>. The scheme God-world-church is now challenging the heart of the scheme God-church-world.

## 2.2 John Meyendorff’s critique of secular theological anthropology

The keynote address in Louvain 1971 was given by John Meyendorff (1926-1992). Described by his colleague Nicholas Lossky as “an outstanding Russian Orthodox theologian, church historian and Byzantine scholar”<sup>36</sup>, he

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<sup>30</sup> “The Finality of Jesus Christ in the Age of Universal History”, *Bulletin of the WCC Division of Studies*, VIII(2), 1962.

<sup>31</sup> *Faith and Order Louvain 1971 – Study Reports and Documents*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1971, 133-140.

<sup>32</sup> *New Directions in Faith and Order – Bristol 1967*, Geneva, WCC, 1968, 7-31.

<sup>33</sup> *Faith and Order – Minutes of the Meeting of the Commission and Working Committee*, Geneva, WCC, 1968, 19-21.

<sup>34</sup> *Faith and Order Louvain 1971 – Study Reports and Documents*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1971, p. 240.

<sup>35</sup> Ernst Lange, *And Yet It Moves – Dream and Reality of the Ecumenical Movement*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1978, 88.

<sup>36</sup> N. Lossky, “Meyendorff, John B.”, in N. Lossky and others (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC, 2002, p. 760.

was Professor of Patristics and Church History at St Vladimir Theological Seminary, New York, and the new Moderator of the Commission on Faith and Order<sup>37</sup>. The immediate context of his address can be evoked by the following excerpts from the address given in the same day by Eugene Carson Blake, the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches.

According to Blake, in recent meetings of the Central Committee of the World council of Churches, “there have been voices reflecting a wide-spread fear among the constituency of the member churches of the Council alleging that in recent years the WCC has set a new course away from traditional and essential interest in faith in God and the unity of the Church towards an over-preoccupation with ethical action programmes in the world”<sup>38</sup>.

Three years after Uppsala 1968, Blake noted, “the concern within the constituency has not been fully satisfied”. For this reason, he welcomed the theme of the Louvain meeting and underlined the ecumenical strategic importance of the work to be done. For “unless it becomes clearer to our whole constituency than it now is that all that the World Council is and does rises out of the gospel, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, an increasing and destructive polarization of the Church may be expected”<sup>39</sup>. At this juncture, nothing less is required than “a re-examination of the principal traditional fields of theology as each bears upon the actual problem of the unity of the Church *and* the unity of mankind”<sup>40</sup>.

John Meyendorff was one of those concerned voices referred to by Eugene Carson Blake. His keynote address was a deliberate attempt - perhaps we should add, a critical and provocative attempt - to launch the broad theological re-examination called for by Blake. He stated at the outset that given that in the ongoing legitimate shift from theology to anthropology secular categories were

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<sup>37</sup> John Meyendorff, “Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind”, *The Ecumenical Review*, XXIV(1), January 1972, 30-46.

<sup>38</sup> Eugene C. Blake, “General Secretary’s Louvain Address”, *The Ecumenical Review*, XXIV(1), January 1972, 26.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

shaping much of recent ecumenical thinking, the problem was to define “which anthropology we choose as criterion in our shifted ‘Faith and Order’ thinking”<sup>41</sup>.

Meyendorff’s starting point was Patristic anthropology. “Man” is God’s image, theocentric, and his destiny is living communion with God, which is made possible in Jesus Christ, who reveals what man authentically is. *Koinonia*, which defines the Church, is primarily “a unity of man *with God*” and only secondarily, “a unity of men with each other”<sup>42</sup>. It holds together faith as historical continuity and authority, on the one hand, and faith as personal experience and freedom, on the other hand. This means that the Church is not divided, that the fullness of *koinonia* exists only in Christ and is given in the eucharist, and that the local sacramental community is – eschatologically – its full realisation as it anticipates the Kingdom of God. It follows that we cannot consider the Church “as immanent to the world, so that its destiny is determined by the secular goals of mankind”<sup>43</sup>.

However, Meyendorff went on, recent understandings of salvation in universal and cosmic terms overlook two “crucial aspects which are just as fundamental as universalism – the reality of freedom and the reality of evil”<sup>44</sup>. The New Testament associates “secular mankind” with slavery and dependence. If the Church is to serve the world and unite humankind, it can do so “only if it is *free from them*”<sup>45</sup>. Christian freedom is the likeness of God in us. This is “the joy and the dignity of the slaves, of the persecuted, of the deprived, and of the humiliated...”<sup>46</sup> Concerning evil, its manifestations are recognised, but a theology of evil is tragically missing. Evil has a personalised existence which affects the unity of humankind. Humanity is engaged in a “tragic, cosmic struggle”<sup>47</sup> in which Good and Evil meet. Thus, the unity of humanity, in order to be true and authentic, must be

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<sup>41</sup> John Meyendorff, “Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind”, *The Ecumenical Review*, XXIV(1), January 1972, 3. 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

*exercised* as the preliminary condition to authentic life in Christ. It follows that our choices “are not between absolute Good and absolute Evil...”<sup>48</sup> The ethical absolute is utopianism. Christ’s achievement did not consist of “revolutionising the world and making it sensibly better than it was before”<sup>49</sup>.

According to Meyendorff’s last point, the coincidence between the unity of the Church and the unity of humanity is eschatological. The unity of the Church is “an anticipation of the unity of mankind”<sup>50</sup>. In the eucharist “it is possible to taste the very reality of future unity”<sup>51</sup>. The meaning of worship as liberation “is best understood by those Christians who are openly rejected by the world, persecuted, oppressed, or segregated – in communist Russia or in the black ghettos of America”<sup>52</sup>.

### 2.3 Míguez Bonino on Meyendorff’s thinking “hovering above history and the world”

José Míguez Bonino responded to Meyendorff<sup>53</sup>. The words of the Orthodox theologian moved him in two directions. Meyendorff had managed to focus on the central issue of anthropology, to connect it with the two foci of the Louvain’s theme, namely the unity of the Church and the unity of humanity, and finally to place this connection in the framework of eschatology. The Orthodox theologian had insisted on centrality of local eucharistic community, and on *koinonia* as a central category for the reflection on unity. Míguez welcomed all this.

However, Míguez also felt “a growing uneasiness”<sup>54</sup>. This came from the fact that Meyendorff’s theology seemed unable to recognise its own historicity and its implications. This explains Míguez Bonino’s

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>53</sup> José Míguez Bonino, “Comments on ‘Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind’”, *The Ecumenical Review*, XXIV(1), January 1972, 47-50.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

methodological question: “From what point is this theology done? What is the historical locus of a theologian who can think and write this theology? What is the location which makes this perspective possible?” This seems to be a place, Míguez went on, in which it is possible to do theology without involvement in the issues of the world, to discard secular categories. All in all, he noted, “this theology seems to be possible for a man placed outside conflict and tension, hovering above history and the world, detachedly looking at men and history *sub specie aeternitatis*”. According to Míguez Bonino, this place seems to be the “eschatological eucharist”, an “unthreatened standpoint” which becomes “the centre of unity, the point of departure for our reflection about the unity of the Church and the unity of mankind”.

Míguez’s theological problem becomes even clearer. We cannot place ourselves in that place, he said, because that is the place for which one can only “hope and pray”. Our theology, he continued, is done “within the conditions of this worldly, historical existence, here between the times, at a eucharist and in a Church which are fraught with all the ambiguities and tensions of common human life, subject to an unavoidable entanglement with ideologies and determinisms, secular categories and conscious or unconscious involvement”. One may ask whether this “threatened and conflicting world” is not the one “in which Biblical thought and action themselves find their *locus*”. If the work for justice and peace may be of limited eschatological significance, as Míguez argues that Meyendorff had suggested, then we may be led to reconciliation with “things as they are”. We withdraw into the absolute by absolutizing our relative standpoint, Míguez Bonino contended. This means, in our case, he concluded, “absolutizing as ‘Christian unity’ one of the patterns of thought and structure that can be so clearly dated historically, politically, ideologically”<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> José Míguez Bonino, “Comments on ‘Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind’”, *The Ecumenical Review*, XXIV(1), January 1972, 47-50.

### III. Salamanca 1973: Míguez Bonino on the Western bourgeois oikoumene

#### III.1. A new dialogue on the core of the ecumenical vision

The same 1971 Faith and Order meeting mandated one of its committees to review, in light of ongoing ecumenical developments, “the purpose and nature of the unity we seek and the means of manifesting it”<sup>56</sup>. In the new ecumenical context created by Vatican II, this assignment included not only the monitoring of theological and practical aspects of Church union negotiations and organic unions, along the lines of the New Delhi vision of the unity of all in each place in a committed fellowship, but also the monitoring of a growing number of bilateral dialogues which would soon lead to the re-emergence of full mutual recognition in reconciled *confessional* diversity as a model of Church union.

One of the results of that mandate was the holding in Salamanca, Spain, in 1973, of an international consultation, on “Concepts of Unity and Models of Union”. This theme, bearing on the core of the classical ecumenical vision, gave Míguez Bonino the occasion to pursue the critique of ecumenical idealism by showing that for an ecumenism aware of its intrinsic contextuality, an ecumenism dominated by the illusion of universality was irrelevant.

#### III.2 Míguez Bonino: Ecumenism in Latin America and the contextual irrelevance of Faith and Order’s agenda

Míguez Bonino’s contribution to Salamanca 1973 made it explicit at the outset both its inevitable contextuality and its provisional character. Its title was “A Latin American Attempt to Locate the Question of Unity”<sup>57</sup>. He indicated

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<sup>56</sup> For what follows cf. “Committee V – Church Union Negotiations and Bilateral Conversations”, in *Faith and Order Louvain 1971 – Study Reports and Documents*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1971, 230-238; see also “Conspectus of Studies to be Carried Out”, in *Faith and Order Louvain 1971*, 240-241.

<sup>57</sup> José Míguez Bonino, “A Latin American Attempt to Locate the Question of Unity”, in *What Kind of Unity?* Geneva, World Council of Churches,



to his audience that this title should “be taken literally” because he was attempting “to locate the problem of division and unity as it presents itself for those of us who strive to become aware of what it means to be God’s people in the time of suffering and hope in which our people are living”. In what follows I will present the core of Míguez’s contribution to the Salamanca Conference in a way that suggests affinities between its rhetoric and what was then the emerging style of liberation theologies in Latin America.

### III.2.1. Analysis of the ecumenical situation in Latin America

Míguez Bonino’s starting point was not a reference to Patristics, as it was Meyendorff’s in Louvain, nor was it a reference to John Wesley’s theology or to past Faith and Order studies. It was rather an attempt – aware of its historicity – to interpret the existing ecumenical situation in Latin America.

Two “facts” characterise the present ecumenical situation in Latin America, he noted. The first is indifference towards the classical models of ecumenical relation such as organic union and conciliar ecumenism. The second fact is the growth of transconfessional groups and movements, which are “drawn together by a common engagement in a *mission* which is understood as *the* mission of the church at the present juncture in history”<sup>58</sup>. These movements are gathered around a centre, which is “a personal and communal experience of the immediacy of the Spirit or a commitment to the struggle for liberation in socio-political as well as religious terms”<sup>59</sup>.

Míguez Bonino went on to propose a threefold typology of these “transconfessional movements” in which the problem of the unity of God’s peoples reconfigures the problem of the unity of the people of God<sup>60</sup>. There is,

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1974, 51-62. The book includes the main contributions to the Salamanca consultation.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

first of all, the *Charismatic* family: For this family the Church is the gathering in which Christians experience “a common immediacy of the Spirit”. The Church is “the realm where this life becomes available”. As a result the most important service is the invitation to participate in the fellowship.

There is, secondly, the *Revolutionary* family. This family hears the Gospel as a call to justice to be understood “in terms of the historical conditions of neo-colonial and capitalist oppression and dependence in which we live”. The answer of faith takes the nature of “a historical commitment to the struggle for liberation”. The Church cannot be impartial. The call and function of the Church is “to make the right commitment, the option which corresponds to God’s liberating purpose at a given time”. This does not mean to make exclusively immanent the liberation offered in the Gospel, but to claim that this deeper dimension can only be historically articulated from within the socio-political struggle.

There is, finally, the *Conservative* family. Here the option seems less defined because it claims to be “the continuing embodiment and depositary of the ‘normative’ Christian faith”. It sees the church as “a socially stable and structured religious body charged with the preservation and transmission of a religious tradition”, which is usually associated with “a cultural and frequently also with an ideological heritage and conception”<sup>61</sup>. This “is present in every ecclesial body and dominant in many”.

In this ecumenical configuration marked by the concern for the coming of God’s kingdom to the world and the role of the Christian community and its unity in it, the classical Faith and Order ecclesiological question takes “a new and more radical form”. It is no longer “What is the Church?” It is rather “what is the Church for?” It is now a question about the role which churches play or are meant to play particularly within life-centred human struggles<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

While the prevailing vision of unity relates the ontological question about the Church to the possibility of overcoming conflicting confessional understandings of the Church and its unity, in the Latin American ecumenical situation the existence of different confessions “is not the great scandal that once it was”, and the debate about confessional identities is “mostly artificial”, especially because Latin American churches were never confessional “except formally”: their confessional consciousness was closely related to their foreignness. The only real confessional distinction, he goes on to note, is the one between Catholics and Protestants, which is “slowly losing an identifiable content and being replaced by transconfessional distinctions and groupings”<sup>63</sup>.

Míguez Bonino’s conclusion seems therefore inevitable: at the present point “it is enough to realize that the ecumenical movement, built on the basis of the existence and significance of different confessional traditions and aiming at the discussion, *rapprochement* and eventual union of them, becomes largely irrelevant for our own problem”<sup>64</sup>. For the wider public today, therefore, what is difficult to understand is not the inherited confessional intra-Christian divisions, he writes, but “the fact of the growing polarisation within each church and across Christianity as whole concerning the meaning of the Christian faith, its place and significance in our historical situation, the proper function and stance of the Church”. We are up against “conflicting and mutually exclusive understandings of what it means to be a Christian in Latin America in the last third of the twentieth century”<sup>65</sup>.

### III.2.2. Theological understanding of the ecumenical situation in Latin America

The second step of Míguez Bonino’s argument is more explicitly theological. In his view, the analysis of the ecumenical situation in Latin America raises once again the old question: “Where is the Church?” The classical answer, based on institutional continuity of the church in

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

history, no longer suffices. It is also necessary to reflect on “the continuation of purposes and functions”. The roots of the ecumenical problems lie in the divorce between institutional continuity and missionary community. The problem of unity in Latin America is “the struggle for a reconstitution of the Church”<sup>66</sup>.

For Míguez Bonino, the struggle for the reconstitution of the Church involved first the recognition that the non-theological factors of division had a systemic character. Sociological and ideological factors, often disguised, have a “decisive weight” in human and ecclesial division. They are not simply ingredients of the problem; they rather constitute “the socio-historical matrix of our churches and of the ecumenical movement”.

In other words, “there are only historically and ideologically ‘datable’ churches”. In the case of Latin America, he writes, we know only “a colonial church” and “neo-colonial churches”. The growing number of transconfessional families are discerned according to “the way in which they place themselves in relation to this effort” to overcome the neo-colonial age.

This understanding of the “non-theological” factors can be applied to organic union and conciliar ecumenism. The concepts of negotiation, representation, procedure, bear the mark of “the liberal ideology and the democratic parliamentary system of the age of Anglo-Saxon domination...”<sup>67</sup> This is the “historical matrix” of the concepts and models of unity that the Louvain Conference is addressing. According to Míguez Bonino, this means that the present Latin American situation, namely the struggle to overcome the capitalist neo-colonial age and to create a new society can also be “an impulse for unity and provide models for its realization”<sup>68</sup>.

This same analysis can be applied to the confessional families and to the idea of the convocation of a genuine ecumenical council. The problems raised in relation to the

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

convocation of an ecumenical council “have been confined almost totally to juridical claims of the world confessions”. But we should take seriously the fact, Bonino continued, that “world relationships are today determined by the pattern of domination/dependence and that the same pattern determines the relation of centre/periphery in the great confessional bodies”<sup>69</sup>.

The struggle for the reconstitution of the church involved, secondly, the recognition of the terms “church” and “unity” as analogous critical concepts. This means that the ecumenical movement should give up “the attempt to erect one of the existing ecclesial entities as ‘the full measure’ of ecclesial reality against which one could measure the ‘ecclesial density’ of the rest”<sup>70</sup>. As a result, the struggle for the church appears as “the ecclesiology for unity”. Within the struggle for “a new organisation of human life and society”, churches are also in crisis as new ways of being the church are emerging. For us, at least, Míguez Bonino concludes, “the search for unity is the struggle for the Church as it strives to take shape in the quest for a new kind of human life in a new society”<sup>71</sup>.

### III.2.3. Emerging tasks of the ecumenical situation in Latin America

Míguez Bonino’s Latin American attempt to locate the question of Christian unity took a third and final step by raising, considering the second step, the practical question of its emerging ecumenical tasks in that context.<sup>72</sup>

They included the theological and ideological clarification of what is at stake in the struggle of the different transconfessional movements; the approach of the “wealth of words and signs” in which they are expressing their Christian identity; the need for keeping open the possibilities for encounter between these different movements; an ecumenical discussion on “the nature of

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

proclamation”, which is “the ultimate power for unity and division”<sup>73</sup>, and the importance of holding on to the significance of common projects and action in the area of social and pastoral service.

## Conclusion

Towards the end of his address to the 1968 Uppsala Assembly, W.A Visser 't Hooft affirmed his – and the classical ecumenical movement's – long-life attachment to what he called a vertically-based approach to the relation between the church and the world (God-church-world), and warned the Assembly against the consequences for the search for Christian visible unity of a horizontally-based approach, which seemed to ignore that humanity is one not in itself, but as object of God's love.

Three years later, in Louvain 1971, John Meyendorff couched his opening address to that conference also in terms of warning. Visser 't Hooft warned against “horizontalism”. Meyendorff warned against the consequences for the ongoing work of Faith and Order of the influence of a western secular theological anthropology.

Although Visser 't Hooft's understanding of God's saving work for the world, and the role of the church and its unity in it, was certainly very different from Meyendorff's, the Reformed ecumenist and the Orthodox theologian converged not only in their common rejection of an understanding of God's saving work in the world that would not be closely tied up with the ministry of the traditional forms of church life, but also in a certain hierarchical dualism about visible unity that called first for unity in faith, sacramental life and ministry, and only on a second (and secondary?) moment for unity in the service of the kingdom.

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

Míguez Bonino belonged to a confessional tradition marked by the Protestant Reformation which traditionally understands God's design for the world and the role of the church and its unity in terms that have family resemblances with Visser 't Hooft's understanding of the same issues.

However, the similar confessional starting point did not prevent the Methodist and the Reformed from describing in mutually conflicting terms what lies at the core of the ecumenical vision.

By attempting to understand the Christian message and its life of *koinonia* out of solidarity with Christians struggling for their human survival, Bonino's theology of Christian hope articulates the pressure of the eschaton upon human history with a missiology in which God's relation to the poor and marginalised rejects the hierarchical dualism about unity that brought Meyendorff and Visser 't Hooft together.

It also prevents the thinking about the church and its unity from being organically isolated from what makes Christian churches human – all too human... - in their historical unity with what Míguez called the Western bourgeois *oikoumene*<sup>74</sup> which is being challenged by the other *oikoumene* and the other ecumenism of the poor and the marginalised.

This “anti-*oikoumene*”<sup>75</sup> holds together, in an ecologically non-hierarchical way, what is necessary for making life possible (*oikonomy*) and the common faith, sacramental life and ministry necessary for making Christian visible unity possible (*oikumenism*), so that the flock will not listen to the false voice of another shepherd

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. J. Míguez Bonino, “A ‘Third World’ Perspective on the Ecumenical Movement”, in M. Kinnamon (ed.), *Towards Visible Unity*, Geneva, WCC, 1982, vol. I, 58-67. Cf. also *The Ecumenical Review*, 34, 1982; “*Oikoumene* and Anti-*oikoumene*”, in T. Wieser (ed.), *Cultures in Dialogue*, Geneva, 1985, 1-5; “Freedom through Unity – Liberation through Ecumenism”, [www.atonementfriars.org/lectures/freedom\\_through\\_unity.htm](http://www.atonementfriars.org/lectures/freedom_through_unity.htm), downloaded on October 4 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. the title and argument of J. Míguez Bonino, “*Oikoumene* and Anti-*oikoumene*”, in T. Wieser (ed.), *Cultures in Dialogue*, Geneva, 1985, 1-5.

calling for a false unity that may lead them to further oppression rather than to liberation.

This sheds light and leads us back to the quotation that in epigraph of this article: “as in other times in history, the quest for the true unity is at the same time the struggle for the true division”.